Pause, with an expectant look

One of the easiest and most effective strategies is to stop and wait with an expectant look on your face. This both cues people to inspect what you just said and does create a slot for them to fill it.

If you’re on the phone, staying silent achieves a similar function. It won’t take much time (a second or thereabouts) for the person you’re talking to to hear that you are not responding and therefore not going along with what they have just said.

Direct challenge

On some occasions you will judge it necessary to directly challenge. Challenges include asking for some sort of explanation (“What do you mean by saying XYZ?”), negatively evaluating the behavior (“That’s really sexist”), focusing on the person (“You can’t generalise like that”), or some combination thereof (“I don’t think you should talk like that”).

All these are likely to generate friction. The challenged person is likely to react defensively or cosmically, and/or treat you as an authority or aggressor. In other words, direct challenges are likely to create resistance, and these may escalate – so it’s worth being prepared.

Indirect challenge

Another way to respond is to highlight what the person has just said and soften it.

For instance, research examining when people make generalizations or use stereotypic language (a particular group shows these generalizations can be challenged directly through sarcastic formulations that expose their overgeneralising nature. So, for example, if person A says “Women don’t drink pubs, they drink halves”, person B can counter with “Oh yeah, all women ONLY drink halves”. At this point, people tend to get the message and go on to correct what they are saying.

Softened challenge

If the person doing an ‘is’ is a friend or long-term colleague, it can be especially difficult to respond. The force of an indirect challenge can be pre-emptive apology or account (e.g. “I hope I’m not misinterpreting you”, “I think you didn’t mean what I heard”, “I’m not sure you didn’t mean what you said”) and then tackle their problematic action directly.

Intervening as a third party

Sometimes it’s important to intervene on another’s behalf. For example, if the person who has said the (possibly) discriminatory thing is a member of an in-group or majority group, or in a position of authority. However, doing intervention on someone’s behalf risks patronizing the person being spoken to and assuming that their response is valid and correct. So, assess whether your intervention is likely to be supported by much other evidence (e.g. “I really think you need to talk about this more”), or if you’re sure you didn’t mean what you said, and then tackle their problematic action directly.

The advice outlined in this document was first shared and discussed at a workshop delivered for Loughborough University’s Women’s Network, and was produced by the Dis guise and Rhetoric Group (DARG)

Loughborough University has an online reporting tool that allows you to report incidents such as domastic violence (including honour-based), bullying and harassment, stalking, hate incidents (including racism, homophobia, etc.), safeguarding, sexual violence, mental health and wellbeing (including self-harm and suicide attempts), substance misuse and any other welfare concerns.

References


Stokoe, E., & Edwards, D. (2013). “What was that you were saying?” Research shows that when conversation analysts call ‘repair initiators’ (such as a simple ‘huh?’) are often enough to get people to redo what they just said, and this often includes correcting their problematic talk. Other examples include ‘What?’ or ‘Sorry?’

A related strategy is to look confused and ask, “What was that you were saying about XYZ?”. Creating opportunities for people to self-correct has the advantage of minimizing friction which nevertheless tackling the ‘ism’.

If you’re on the phone, staying silent achieves a similar function. It won’t take much time (a second or thereabouts) for the person you’re talking to to hear that you are not responding and therefore not going along with what they have just said.

Act later

Not only is it difficult to think about the right response to someone’s behaviour in the spur of the moment, we do not have equal access to the ‘conversational floor’ to intervene. So, if you can’t intervene live, then as soon as you can after the event, talk to someone else about it (ideally someone who was in the conversation) to get their perspective and help you decide what to do.

When someone behaves in a discriminatory way – whether subtly or overtly, and whether in a group or one-to-one – it can be difficult to decide what, if anything, to do. This decision can be especially complicated at work when so many other dynamics are in play, such as racial and personal identities, power, status, and ‘back off’ entitlement to repeat from experience. But it’s likely that, at some point while at work, you have thought to yourself, “Am I hearing what I think I’m hearing? Am I going to have to listen to this? Am I going to say something?”

Research shows that it is relatively easy to describe what should be done in such situations, but that it is much harder to do it during live social interaction. There are barriers to speaking out, which researchers have noted occur immediately after re-hearsals, what was said is unambiguously a prejudicial ‘ism’ (e.g. racism, sexism) and (other forms, and their interactions) since some are easier to spot than others, also the fact that saying something will often disrupt the ongoing conversation.

Speaking out carries the risk that you will be cast as the combative person even though it’s the other party who got ‘ism’; much time (a second or thereabouts) for the person you’re talking to hear that you are not responding and therefore not going along with what they have just said. However, delivering an indirect challenge requires judgment, use the following advice as the basis for discussions about how to say when it’s not okay.

Kno.ing that there are others who share your assessment can help you decide whether to say something now, and those others might support you verbally.

Try to catch the eyes of trusted colleagues to see if you can identify check that they are seeing what you are seeing and that “This is not okay.”

Read the room

How to try to catch the eyes of trusted colleagues to see if you can identify whether to say something now… and those others might support you verbally.

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